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1998

JOSEF WIESEHÖFER (HG.)

DAS PARTHERREICH  
UND SEINE  
ZEUGNISSE

THE ARSACID EMPIRE:  
SOURCES AND  
DOCUMENTATION

BEITRÄGE DES INTERNATIONALEN COLLOQUIUMS,  
EUTIN  
(27. – 30. JUNI 1996)



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## THE AVESTA IN THE PARTHIAN PERIOD

ALMUT HINTZE (CAMBRIDGE)

This article is concerned with the question of the transmission and continuity of the Avesta, the sacred texts of the Zoroastrians, in the Parthian period. Part 1 offers a summary of the literary sources and part 2 a description of the research carried out on this topic up to the present. Part 3 discusses the question of the existence of a written Avesta in Arsacid times, part 4 the evidence derived from Avestan and Pahlavi texts for the way the tradition was handed down, and part 5 the linguistic and graphic evidence for the transmission of the Avesta. Finally, part 6 deals briefly with the Avesta alphabet before summarizing the results in part 7, the conclusion.

### 1. Sources

As so often in Indo-European studies, the main problem in reconstructing the transmission of the Avesta in the Parthian period derives from the scarcity and inadequacy of the sources available. Any reconstruction can only be based on Pahlavi texts, on the one hand, and on a few non-Iranian references found in the works of some Greek, Latin and Arabic authors, on the other. The most trustworthy evidence, however, has been discovered in the character of the Avestan script and language.

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According to the first account, the divinely revealed teachings of Zoroaster were already written down under Kavi Vištāspa. The original was kept in the treasury<sup>2</sup>, one copy was preserved in the archive, and others were in circulation throughout the kingdom. In the course of the devastation brought upon Iran by Alexander, the official copy was destroyed, the original carried away by the invaders and translated into Greek<sup>3</sup>. Later, King Ardašir ī Pābagān ordered that the Avesta be reassembled under the supervision of

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The destruction of a precious Achaemenid Avesta codex by Alexander is also mentioned in various other Pahlavi sources<sup>10</sup>. The Letter of Tansar relates the complete loss of the Zoroastrian books and legends in the period between Alexander and Ardašīr: Alexander burnt the religious books which were written on 12,000 ox-hides and kept in Ištāxr. Afterwards, one third of the sacred texts survived in the oral tradition, and thus remained in the people's hearts. These, however, were legends and traditions. But the law-books

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and decrees had been lost, and later the oral tradition preserving the legends and traditions also sank into oblivion<sup>11</sup>. Thus, according to Tansar, the Avesta was finally lost completely and entirely re-created under Ardašīr<sup>12</sup>.

In spite of variations in detail, the Zoroastrian tradition unanimously relates a loss of the sacred texts caused by Alexander's invasion and a collection beginning under the Arsacids and continued by the Sasanian kings. The centres of tradition are Staxr in the Persis on the one hand and Sistan on the other.

P.O. Skjærvø has retrieved the earliest reference to the Sasanian Avesta by restoring the following text passage in the „Vision of Kirdēr“ (ca. 270 A.D.): ZK [‘w]gwn cygwn // [PWN n]skynm ‘dty, and in the same way as it is revealed [in the Na]sk’. Skjærvø assumes that the Nask in question may be the Vidēvdād, since there are parallels between the Vision of Kirdēr and eschatological passages in the nineteenth fargard of the Vidēvdād<sup>13</sup>. The statement in §8 of the same inscription, that Zoroastrian priests (*magu-*) were flourishing in the provinces of Pārs and Sagastān, as well as in various other lands testifies to the importance of these two particular provinces for the history of Zoroastrianism as well as to the diffusion of the religion throughout the country<sup>14</sup>.

References to the transmission of the Avesta dating from the Parthian period itself are only found in non-Iranian sources. The existence of a written Avesta is indicated by the Greek author Pausanias, who wrote between 143 and 176 A.D. In his *Graeciae Descriptio* 5.27.5–6 (= Clemen 1920a, 62–63), he remarks that the magi in Lydia used books from which they read the words chanted during the ceremony (ἀνὴρ μάγος ... ἐπάδει δὲ ἐπιλεγόμενος ἐκ βιβλίου)<sup>15</sup>.

Also bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (260–340 A.D.) refers to a collection of holy scriptures (ἐπὶ συναγωγῇ) of the Zoroastrians (Euseb. praep. ev. 1.10.52).

Another source pointing to the existence of a written Avesta are the Coptic Kephalaia of the Manichaean tradition. Here it is said that Zaratustra's pupils wrote down the teachings of the prophet after his death, whereas Zaratustra himself, like Jesus and Buddha, did not make use of writing. The point is made that the teachings of these „fathers of justice“ would have been preserved better and more faithfully had they only been committed to writing by their authors, and for this reason Mani made sure to write down his teachings himself<sup>16</sup>.

Pliny the Elder (23–79 A.D.), *Naturalis Historia* 30.2.3–5, referring to Hermippus of Smyrna (3rd cent. B.C.)<sup>17</sup>, relates that Zoroaster wrote two million verses on magic, which, however, were lost. *En passant*, Pliny also mentions ‘Zaratus the Median’, of whom nothing but the name has survived: *Hermippus qui de tota ea arte diligentissime scripsit et*

11 Tansar Nāmāg 11 (ed. Minovi) = Boyce 1968, 37. Cf. Bailey 1943, 153. Marquart 1901, 30, Christensen, 1937, 1944, 64f., Minovi 1932, and Bailey, *Zor. Probl.* 156, attribute this letter to the years between 557 and 570 A.D. during the reign of Husrav I. Anōšīrvān. Boyce 1968, 16–22 considers it possible that the kernel of this letter dates from the time of Ardašīr in the 3rd cent. A.D. and was elaborated and adapted under Husrav I.

12 Cf. Boyce 1968, 37 n.2.

13 Skjærvø 1983 [1985], 276, 289–291.

14 See Skjærvø 1983 [1985], 278.

15 Boyce/Grenet 1991, 237 maintain that Zoroastrian priests in Lydia may well have used the Greek script to write down some of their most important liturgical texts.

16 Polotsky/Böhlig (eds.), 1940, p.7, lines 27–33: „[Der Apostel] des Lichtes, der glänzende *Phōstēr* (28) [ist gekommen nach] Persien (*Persis*) zu dem König Hystaspes (29) [und er hat ausgewählt] gerechte (*dikaïos*) und wahrhafte Jünger (30) [und hat gepredigt] seine Hoffnung in Persien (*Persis*), aber (31) ... [nicht hat] Zarathustra (*Zarādēs*) Bücher geschrieben, sondern seine (32) Jünger nach seinem Tode erinnerten sich und schrieben ... (33) [die Bücher], die sie heute lesen“; cf. *ibid.* p.8, lines 7–12 and Bailey 1943, 166f.

17 Re Hermippus' writings on the Iranian magi see Boyce/Grenet 1991, 508, 525f.



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A purely oral tradition of the Avesta is attested to by the Christian bishop Basilios of Caesarea in Cappadocia (ca. 330–379 A.D.). In 377 A.D. in a letter to bishop Epiphanius of Constantia, the ancient Salamis, in Cyprus, he writes about a strong Zoroastrian community in Cappadocia. According to Basilios, these Zoroastrians (τὸ δὲ τῶν μαγουσαιῶν ἔθνος) came to Cappadocia from Mesopotamia a long time before and spread all over the country. They did not intermarry with the indigenous population and preserved their own customs. It was impossible to dispute with them about religion as they were so completely dominated by the devil: λόγῳ δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς κεχρησθαι, καθότι εἰσιν ἐζωγρημένοι ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου εἰς τὸ ἐκείνου θέλημα, παντελῶς ἐστὶν ἀδύνατον. These *Magousaiōi* possessed neither books nor teachers of faith, but acquired their religion unthinkingly, whereby the sons received their 'infidelity' from their fathers in a purely oral form: οὐτε γὰρ βιβλία ἔστι παρ' αὐτοῖς, οὐτε διδάσκαλοι δογμάτων, ἀλλὰ ἔθει ἀλόγῳ συντρέφονται, παῖς παρὰ πατρὸς διαδεχόμενοι τὴν ἀσέβειαν<sup>20</sup>.

A similar observation is also made by Strabo 15.3.15 (lived ca. 64/3 B.C. to 21 A.D.), whose account of magian acts of worship in Cappadocia makes no mention of books used by the magi<sup>21</sup>.

## 2. Research carried out on the transmission of the Avesta

The history of the texts of the Avesta has been described by Darmesteter 1893, v-vi, xx-xxvi and Geldner 1896–1904, 32–39 following the Denkard account. They argue that, in the Achaemenid period, there existed a written Avesta which was then destroyed and dispersed by Alexander. The first collection of whatever had survived would have taken place under one of the Arsacid kings called Valāxš, and the Sasanian king Ardašīr ī Pā-

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19 Ziegler 1967, 2318f.

20 Letter no. 258. The Greek text is reproduced in Cumont 1896, 10 n.3; Clemen 1920a, 86; text and Eng. translation in Defferari 1961, 34–46; Way 1955, 217–221. Boyce/ Grenet 1991, 277f. remark on this passage: „That their community still nevertheless handed down its religious teachings orally, without help from books, is a valuable observation of Bishop Basil's, as is his comment on the tenacious holding by the *magousaiōi* to their own customs, while keeping aloof from others“. Cf. also Bailey 1943, 164f.

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bagān continued this work with the help of the priest Tansar. Under Ardašīr's son and successor Šābuhr I. the non-religious parts were added to the text corpus, and under Šābuhr II. an orthodox version of the Zoroastrian faith was instituted by the priest Ādurbad Mahrspandān. Later, this orthodoxy was finally established and strengthened under king Husrav I. Anōšīrvān.

On the basis of source material found in the Syriac Acts of Christian Persian Martyrs, François Nau reaches another conclusion<sup>22</sup>. He maintains that the Avesta would have been transmitted exclusively orally until the end of the Sasanian period and written down only in post-Sasanian times as a reaction to pressure exerted by other religions, especially Islam. Nau bases his argument on the observation that the Syriac Acts of Christian Persian Martyrs refer only to an oral tradition of the Avesta, never a written one (*ibid.* 183, 186). Against this view, however, Christensen has rightly objected that positive evidence for an oral tradition does not *a priori* exclude a co-existing written one<sup>23</sup>.

The most comprehensive study of the transmission of the Avesta has been made by H.W. Bailey. In the fifth of his Ratanbai Katrak Lectures, delivered in Oxford in 1936 and published in 1943, he collected and translated a large amount of material on *patvand* 'tradition'. He held the view that the Avesta was transmitted orally until the middle of the sixth century A.D., when it was written down completely for the first time<sup>24</sup>. In contrast, J. Duchesne-Guillemin's 1962a, 40–46, in a summary of the sources on the transmission of the Avesta<sup>25</sup>, considers it possible that a written Avesta could have existed in the Arsacid period, though the main stream of tradition would have been oral. Widengren 1965, 245–259, esp. 248, following Wikander 1946, 132–142, distinguishes between a written Šīz-tradition and an oral Ištāxtr-tradition. The assumption of such a written Šīz-tradition, however, cannot be substantiated<sup>26</sup>. Summaries of the transmission of the Avesta are also given by Kellens 1989, 35–36, Boyce/Grcnet 1991, 16–17 with n.70, 121–124 and by Wiesehöfer 1994b, 140f.

### 3. A written Avesta in the Arsacid Period?

In the first half of the 20th century scholars were generally inclined to assume that the Avesta was written down in the Arsacid period. The existence of such a written Avesta had already been postulated in 1902 by Friedrich Carl Andreas (1846–1930) on the basis of linguistic considerations. Andreas claimed that the Sasanian written Avesta had resulted from the mechanical transcription of a text written in a consonantal script of the Pahlavi type. In the course of this alleged transcription, which would have taken place around 400 A.D., the scribes made many mistakes such as vocalizing a postulated Arsacid writing \**ʾwm* or \**gwywtym* as *aom* or *gaoiiaoiīm* respectively. It would be the task of scholarship to reconstruct the supposed Arsacid spellings, the latter being the only reliable basis for a linguistic analysis of Avestan<sup>27</sup>.

22 Nau 1927, 149–199, esp. 178ff.

23 Christensen 1936, 509–512 (= 1944, 515–517); cf. also Nyberg 1938, 13.

24 Bailey 1943, 169, 172f.

25 This section of the book has also appeared as an article in Duchesne-Guillemin 1964, 62–66.

26 It is based on Markwart's interpretation of a problematic word in the Denkard, see Bailey 1943, 155 n.3 and above note 2. Duchesne-Guillemin 1962a, 46f. (= 1964, 65f.) rightly criticizes the theories of Wikander 1946, 133 and Altheim 1951, 64f. concerning the Pahlavi Zoroastrian legends about the transmission of the Avesta.

27 Andreas' theory has been ably described by Henning 1942 [1944], 43–45; cf. also Schlerath 1987, 29. Altheim/Stiehl 1970, 723f., 729ff. think to find a proof for the existence of a written Arsacid Avesta in allegedly Avestan words quoted in the Aramaic inscription of Aśoka in Taxila and a Greek-Aramaic

For the next forty or fifty years this theory dominated Avestan studies and was accepted by such distinguished scholars as J. Wackernagel, E. Benveniste or H. Lommel. However, it was refuted independently by W.B. Henning 1942 [1944], 40f., G. Morgenstierne 1942, 30ff. and H.W. Bailey 1943, 181ff., cf. Hoffmann 1953, 9f. (= 1975, 66f.). The main objections are that the theory does not take seriously the text as it is actually attested, but operates with a hypothetical text based on unsubstantiated premises. Furthermore, Andreas' theory ignores the existence of an oral tradition.

Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that the Avesta was committed to writing before the Sasanian period. Great importance has been attributed to the passage from the aforementioned Coptic Kephalaia (n.16), a document from a tradition hostile to the Zoroastrians. Since the Manichaeans considered the written word to be more authoritative than the spoken one, there would have been an ideal opportunity for them to polemicize against the Zoroastrians, had the latter's tradition been purely oral. Instead, the Manichaeans provide evidence for a written tradition of the Avesta. Therefore, Henning 1942 [1944] 47 considers this passage as testimony to the existence of a written Avesta in the Arsacid period. However, Boyce/Grenet 1991, 16f. n.70; 510 n.42. have made a strong case for the Manichaean document referring to texts belonging to Greek Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha. The same is probably true of Pliny's reference (quoted above) to two million verses allegedly written by Zoroaster: they, too, have been shown to refer rather to Greek Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha<sup>28</sup>. If this is so, it emerges that non-Iranian sources mentioning a written tradition may refer to texts other than those forming part of the Avestan text corpus.

Apart from Babylonia, the use of books is also attested by Pausanias for Zoroastrians in Lydia, whereas other sources, namely Basilios and Strabo, relate a purely oral tradition in Cappadocia. Thus the contradictory information given by the sources apparently varies according to the region dealt with. This may reflect a historical reality in so far as Zoroastrian practice could vary from region to region. Zoroastrians in Lydia were more hellenized than anywhere else and a writing down of Avestan texts in Greek script is not improbable<sup>29</sup>.

In addition to non-Iranian sources, the Zoroastrian tradition, too, relates the existence of Avesta codices dating from the Achaemenid and Parthian periods. If this is credible at all, the script used would have been of the Pahlavi type, originating from Aramaic writing<sup>30</sup>. That indeed Old or early Middle Persian was written in Aramaic script in late Achaemenid or early post-Achaemenid times seems to be testified by the inscription on the tomb of Dareios in Naqš-e Rostam<sup>31</sup>. Yet even in this case a written version of the Avesta cannot have functioned as more than an *aide-mémoire*. For the deficient and heterographic way in which the Aramaic script was used to record Iranian was more or less suitable for conveying a living language, but not an obsolete and hieratic one<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, the Sasanian Avestan script clearly points to an oral tradition, on which the text it records is based. In fact, the character of the Avestan alphabet as a phonetic script can only be understood if the script is considered as a device developed for the sole purpose of

bilingual text from Qandahar. They believe that the transcription into the Avestan alphabet took place in Eastern Iran.

28 Boyce/Grenet 1991, 508.

29 See Boyce/Grenet 1991, 237f.

30 Cf. Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 35.

31 On this inscription see Boyce/Grenet 1991, 119f. and Wiesehöfer 1994, 90f., who discuss the problems involved.

32 This was pointed out by Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 34f. and Boyce 1979, 96. In an earlier article, Hoffmann 1958, 11 (= 1975, 66) was more inclined to assume that the Avesta was written down in the Parthian period: „Es ist mit ziemlicher Wahrscheinlichkeit anzunehmen, dass das Avesta bereits während der Arsakiden-Zeit und zwar im Pahlavi-Alphabet aufgezeichnet wurde“.



writing down the sacred Avestan texts in the way they were pronounced at that time<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, although the existence of a written Avesta in the Arsacid era cannot be excluded, such a codex would be without scientific significance, as the Sasanian archetype of the Avesta is evidently based on the oral tradition<sup>34</sup>.

#### 4. Evidence for oral and written tradition in Avestan and Pahlavi texts

The Avestan texts do not contain explicit statements about their transmission. However, an indirect allusion to the way the texts were handed down is found in Vd 4.45. The passage speaks about the way 'men of the same faith' (*narō hāmō.daēna*), be they 'brothers or companions' (*brāθra vā haxaiia vā* Vd 4.44) 'seeking instruction' (*xratu.cinaphō* Vd 4.45) should be treated. To them the 'sacred formulation should be remembered' (*māvrām spəntəm maraēta*) until 'they have established firmly in their memory those words' (*tā srauuā drənjaiiān*), 'which earlier their teachers had learnt by heart' (*yā paouruuā aēvrapataiiō 'drənjaiiān'*<sup>35</sup>). The vocabulary used here to refer to the sacred texts implies an oral tradition (*mar* 'to remember', *srauuah-* 'the word, teaching', lit.: 'what is heard'; *drənjaiia-* 'learn by heart', lit.: 'make firm').

There are numerous passages in the Pahlavi sources testifying to the high esteem in which the oral tradition was held<sup>36</sup>. The memorizing of the Avesta (*warm-naskihā*) is one of the duties and virtues of a Zoroastrian priest<sup>37</sup>. That also lay people memorized the sacred texts emerges from Ardā Virāz Nāmag 2.2 (ed. Gignoux 1984): there it is said about the seven sisters of Ardā Virāz, that they had learnt the religion and the yašts by heart (*u-šan dēn warm ud yašt kard estād*). In DkM 455.10ff., a Christian asks why Ahura Mazdā proclaimed his religion in the mysterious Avestan language and had it handed down in oral rather than written form<sup>38</sup>.

That the memorizing and writing of texts was practised simultaneously emerges from a passage in *Husraw ud Rēdak* 8–10. It tells of a student, an orphan prince, who had memorized the yašts, the Haðōxt-Nask and the Vīdēvdād, but who was also able to write<sup>39</sup>. We can conclude with Bailey 1943, 166: „If they had a basic book *bunik nipištak* but used it little, we may see in it a tradition coming from a time when there was indeed no book and all was oral“.

33 That the Avestan script was invented to reproduce the spoken word has already been observed by Henning 1942 [1944], 48 and greatly elaborated on by Hoffmann and Narten.

34 Cf. the conclusion of Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 35: „Mag es auch solche Niederschriften gegeben haben, sie spielen jedenfalls keine entscheidende Rolle in der Avesta-Überlieferung, die mündlich erfolgte. Nur die Existenz einer mündlichen Tradition bildet nämlich die Voraussetzung dafür, daß überhaupt eine Speziālschrift für das Avestische geschaffen werden konnte“.

35 Geldner 1896, 29 here reads *drənjaiiān* (so also Kellens 1984, 277). Since the injunctive *'drənjaiiān* is expected, it is likely that such a form was changed, under the influence of the preceding *drənjaiiān*, into the one actually transmitted. Bartholomae 1904, 772f. postulates two separate roots *drang* for semantic reasons (cf. *ibid.* 773 n. s.v. <sup>2</sup> *drang*), yet a semantic development from 'make firm' to 'learn by heart' is also possible, as was rightly implied by Kellens 1984, 140 (: 'affermir, étudier').

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## 5. Linguistic and graphic evidence for the transmission of the Avesta

Apart from the Zoroastrian tradition about the transmission of their holy texts it is also possible to draw conclusions on the basis of the Avestan script and language. In this respect the observations made by Karl Hoffmann, partly in collaboration with Johanna Narten, are particularly valuable<sup>40</sup>. He observed that the traditional pronunciation of the Avesta, as it was written down in the Sasanian period, contains elements which are also characteristic of Old Persian. One of these is the pronunciation of postconsonantal *i* and *u* as *ii* and *uu*, such as in trisyllabic Av. *añiia-*, *hauruuu-* and OP *aniya-*, *haruva-*. It emerges from Avestan metrical texts that *añiia-* and *hauruuu-* were disyllabic in the language of the authors, and this agrees with what is to be expected from the historical point of view, as shown by Vedic disyllabic *anyá-*, *sarvá-*<sup>41</sup>. Therefore, the syllabic realization of postconsonantal *i* and *u* must be a phenomenon which entered the traditional pronunciation of Avestan in the course of the oral tradition. As the same characteristic is found in Old Persian, and as south-west Iran is considered in the Zoroastrian tradition to be a centre of Avestan transmission, it may be justified to see a causal connection in the existence of this phonetic feature in the two Old Iranian dialects. We can then conclude with Hoffmann that it entered the pronunciation of Avestan in south-west Iran at a time when the syllabic realization of postconsonantal *i* and *u* in Old Persian was still intact, i.e. before the contraction of *-iia-* to *-i-* in Middle Persian. This implies that the Avestan realization of postconsonantal *i* and *u* as *ii* and *uu* goes back to Achaemenid times and that the Persis was already a centre of transmission during this period<sup>42</sup>.

This conclusion drawn on phonetic and graphic grounds is supported by the Zoroastrian tradition, because, according to the Pahlavi texts, the city of Staxr (Arab. *Iṣṭaxr*) near Persepolis<sup>43</sup> contained the *Diz-i Nibišt* of the Sasanian rulers, where the Sasanian Avesta codex was kept<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, the language of the Zoroastrian theologians, the Pahlavi, is the dialect of south-west Iran.

All these data have been put forward by K. Hoffmann to support his conclusion that the Avesta, which originated in east Iran, has come down to the present day only in its south-west Iranian redaction<sup>45</sup>. The Avesta was already being recited in Persis during the Achaemenid period and there is a continuity of tradition from that time throughout the Parthian and Sasanian periods<sup>46</sup>.

That there were other centres of tradition is very likely. The Avesta provides a detailed description of the geography of Sistan in south-east Iran as well as referring to important eschatological events scheduled to take place at Lake Hamun<sup>47</sup>. Indeed, certain phonetic features which do not comply with Avestan sound laws are explained by Hoffmann as having entered the language of the Avesta from the dialect of that region, probably from the otherwise unknown Arachotic dialect<sup>48</sup>. The philological evidence is supported by the Zoroastrian tradition, which reports Sistan as one of its strongholds.

40 See Hoffmann 1971, 64–73 (= 1975, 316–326); 1979, 89–93 (= 1992, 736–740); Hoffmann/Narten 1989; Hoffmann/Forssman 1996, 34–37.

41 Hoffmann 1976, 636ff; Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 41f., 67f., 86f.

42 See Hoffmann 1979, 90 (= 1992, 737); Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 42 with n.18; Hoffmann/Forssman 1996, 35f.

43 See Hoffmann/Narten 42, 87 with references; Nyberg 1938, 406f.

44 DkM 405.20 und 22; 412.5; *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* I 5 (ed. Gignoux 1984); *Tansar Nāmag* ed. Minovi 1932, 11 (= transl. Boyce 1968, 37).

45 See Hoffmann 1971, 67 (= 1975, 319).

46 See also Boyce/Grenet 1991, 121f.

47 See on this e.g. Hintze 1994, 42, and especially Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 80 and Boyce/Grenet 1991, 123 and also n.288 (giving further references).

48 Boyce/Grenet 1991, 122–124, while accepting the assumption of a dialectal influence from the region



Furthermore, there are a few linguistic features in Younger Avestan which are probably due to the influence of a north-western (Parthian) or north-eastern Iranian dialect. One of them is the development of  $\delta$  to  $\vartheta$  in the YAv. present *da $\vartheta$ aiti*, vs. OAv. *dadāiti*<sup>49</sup>. The same de-voicing of the dental spirant of the root *dā* is found in many other Iranian dialects, including Parthian *dh-* 'to give', with  $h < \vartheta$ , Chr. Sogdian *pryθ*, Khotan. *parāth-* 'to sell', Bactrian *λṁ-* [lah-] 'to give'<sup>50</sup>. Sporadic devoicing of fricatives is also found in Chwaresmian, though not in the same words as in Avestan<sup>51</sup>. Another example of devoicing, which is probably due to dialectal influence, is the *-f-* in YAv. *nāfa-* 'navel, origin' and a few other words<sup>52</sup>. Other dialectal features have correspondences in north-east Iranian dialects, such as Sogdian. One of them is the loss of *i* before *u* in Av. *juua-* and *cuuaṇt-*, Sogdian *zw-* and Khotan. *jū-* 'to live' vs. OP *jīva-*<sup>53</sup>. Further evidence for the widespread distribution of the Avestan texts throughout Iran may also be seen in the Sogdian version of the *aṣəm vohū* prayer identified by Ilya Gershevitch<sup>54</sup>. Gershevitch holds the view that this prayer is composed in an Old Iranian language, „Old Sogdian“ in particular, because inflexional endings and the pronouns *ahmāi* and *yaṭ* are still preserved. Moreover, since this version of the prayer contains a few Sogdian dialectal features, Gershevitch concludes that it comes from a tradition independent of the Avestan one as the Avestan *aṣəm vohū* prayer would be too sacrosanct to undergo dialectal influence to such an extent. Rather, the Avestan and the Sogdian versions of the prayer would be two independent witnesses of a common pan-Iranian and pre-Zoroastrian ancestor.

However, the evidence supports also an alternative interpretation. For it is equally possible to argue that the inflexional endings as well as the pronouns *ahmāi* and *yaṭ* are retained, because the prayer is composed in Avestan and because the Sogdians received it in Avestan. In that case one would have to admit that the Avestan language underwent influence of the Sogdian dialect. The forms affected are ( $\vartheta$ )*xušt* 'best' for Av. *vahišta-* and the verbal form *iṣti* 'is' instead of Av. *asti*. Furthermore, the spellings *wrt*  $\gamma$  and *rtm* do not necessarily require the interpretation */urtāi/* and */urtam/* suggested by Gershevitch. In the hypothesis that the former was misspelt, the latter could be vocalized as */artam/*. In any case, the interesting feature here is the retention of the consonant cluster *rt* versus Avestan  $\xi$ . It indicates that this version of the prayer reflects a soundshape older than the one which has come down to present within the main stream Sasanian Zoroastrian tradition<sup>55</sup>. If this

of Drangiana/Arachosia on the language of the Avesta, reject Hoffmann's Young Avestan dating as to when such dialectal features would have entered the language of the Avesta. Rather they prefer an early Sasanian date for this process. Yet the name of the river *x $\vartheta$ āstrā-* (< *hu- $\vartheta$ āstrā-*, Yt 19.67) in Arachosia/Drangiane may provide some evidence for the existence of this phonetic feature already in the Avestan language of the Younger Avestan period, as it is probably metrically disyllabic, see Hintze 1994, 30 with n.69. Another indication may be found in the form of the adverb *auui*, which may equally be considered as an Arachotic dialectal feature, as proposed by Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 81–83. If this feature had entered the pronunciation of the Avesta only in Sasanian times, it would be difficult to explain why *auui* is found only in Younger Avestan texts.

49 See Hoffmann/Forssman 1996, 97f.; Hintze 1994, 103 with more examples for  $\vartheta$  instead of  $\delta$ .

50 The Bactrian form was kindly communicated to me by Nicholas Sims-Williams. On the Chr. Sogd. and Khotan. forms see Sims-Williams 1985, 148, where the phenomenon is explained by dissimilation  $\delta - \delta > \delta - \vartheta$ , and 1989, 258 (ad pp. 189–92).

51 MacKenzie 1988, 89.

52 Hoffmann 1958, 8 (= 1975, 65); Hoffmann/Forssman 1996, 98.

53 See Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 78 with references. MacKenzie 1988, 89 points out that in Chwaresmian the verb *zyw-* 'to live' agrees with Western Iranian, such as MP. *zīw-*, Parth. *zīw-*.

54 Gershevitch 1976, 75–82. The fragment is reproduced in Sims-Williams/Hamilton 1990, Pl.22 (Or. 8212/24); cf. also Boyce/Grenet 1991, 124.

55 I am grateful to Professor N. Sims-Williams for calling my attention on these aspects of the problem. – On the phonetic value of Av.  $\xi < *rt$  see Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 38f.; Hoffmann/Forssman 1996, 46.



view is accepted, then the specifically Sogdian dialectal characteristics found in this prayer show that the Avestan texts were adapted to the local dialect of the area where they were handed down not only in Arachosia/Drangiane and the Persis, but also in Sogdiana<sup>56</sup>.

Indirect evidence for the presence of the Zoroastrian religion in Parthia may be seen in the place name *Mozdūrān*, ca. 62 miles east of Tūs and Mašhad in eastern Parthia, and in the mountain name *Kūh-e Mozdūrān*. The name *Mozdūrān* has been traced back by Humbach<sup>57</sup> to an older *\*mazdōrān* and analysed as a derivative in *-ān* from *\*mazdōr* < Av. *mazdā- ahura-*. If one accepts this analysis, then the interesting feature here is the word sequence, *mazdā-* preceding *ahura-*, characteristic of the Older Avesta. Later, the sequence *ahura- mazdā-* was standardized and univerted in Old Persian *auramazdā-* and Pahl. *ōhrmazd*. The geographic name in Parthia could thus preserve an archaism and go back to Old Iranian times<sup>58</sup>.

## 6. The Avestan Alphabet

Scholars agree that the Avestan text corpus which has come down to the present was written down during the Sasanian period. For this sole purpose an alphabet was developed on the basis of late forms of Book Pahlavi. The inventor of this phonetic writing system of Avestan created new letters by adding diaeritic marks to the existing letters taken from Pahlavi<sup>59</sup>. The system of writing vowels, however, does not follow the example of consonantal scripts such as Syriac or Hebrew, in which vowels are indicated by diaeritics under or above the consonants. Rather it complies with that of the Greek or Armenian alphabets by writing the vowels as individual letters<sup>60</sup>. Indeed, some of them seem to be shaped on the model of Greek characters, Av. *ə*, for example, being very similar to Greek *ε*<sup>61</sup>.

The Zoroastrian legend clearly attributes the collection and canonization of the Avestan texts to the Sasanian kings. That there was pressure from other religions possessing a written tradition, such as Christianity or Manichaeism, is very likely<sup>62</sup>. The fact that the Avestan script, with its full notation of the vowels as separate letters, emulates western alphabetic writing systems indicates the direction from which the inventor of the script was being influenced. One of the religions which was opposed by the Sasanian rulers, namely Christianity with its Greek New Testament, could well have offered the model on which Avestan alphabetic writing was based.

56 See Boyce/Grenet 1991, 124.

57 Humbach, *Gāthās*<sup>2</sup> I 41 elaborating on a remark by Olshausen.

58 On the interpretation of the name *ahura- mazdā-* as 'Lord Wisdom' see Oherlies 1989, 86 n.64, who claims that the basic meaning of the adjective *māzdaiiasni-* is '(Religion.) deren Verehrung der mazdā-gilt'. This would imply that Av. *mazdā-* is semantically identical with Ved. *medhā-* 'wisdom'. Yet in contradistinction to the Vedic use, Avestan *mazdā-* is personified as an *ahura-*; it can also be used as a name of the god without *ahura-*. For this reason it is more likely that the compound contains the name of the god: *mazda-iiasna-* 'worship of Mazdā', *māzda-iiasni-* 'belonging to the worship of Mazdā'. In Vedic, a personified *medhā-* may possibly be found in the personal name RV *médhāiithi-* 'whose guest is wisdom' or 'whose guest is the Wise one', cf. the other compounds with *aiithi-* 'guest': *Devāiithi-*, *Nipāiithi-*, *Mūrāiithi-*, see Mayrhofer 1994 [1996], 178 with n.19.

59 The principles on which the Avesta alphabet was developed have been clarified by Bailey 1943, 177–194 and Hoffmann 1971, 64–73 (= 1975, 316–326).

60 Cf. Bailey 1943, 174; Nyberg 1938, 422.

61 Hoffmann/Narten 1989, 29. There is also a variant of the sign *δ* (e.g. fol.13 recto line 5; fol. 28 recto, line 4 in the manuscript F1) which recalls the shape of the Greek *delta*, see Hintze 1991, XX; Panaino 1992, 470.

62 Cf. Nyberg 1938, 414f.

The time when this development took place is disputed. Whereas scholars like Bailey and Boyce/Grenet<sup>63</sup> prefer to date the creation of the Avesta script to the fifth or sixth century A.D., others, such as Henning, assume that the event took place in the fourth century<sup>64</sup>. Hoffmann, too, considers the fourth century as the most likely time in which the Avesta script would have been invented<sup>65</sup>. However, the early Sasanian date of the Middle Persian inscription on a sarcophagus from Constantinople, on which his argument is largely based, has been rendered improbable by F. de Blois<sup>66</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

It would be difficult, or rather impossible, to extend the present knowledge about the transmission of the Avesta without new finds of materials and their publication. The literary evidence preserved in Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian sources has been studied extensively. New insights into the question of the transmission of the Avesta and its distribution over the 'land of the Aryans' have been achieved along the lines laid down by Karl Hoffmann. He has shown that, apart from the Persis, there was at least one other centre of transmission, that in Arachosia. Ilya Gershevitch's brilliant discovery of an „Old Sogdian“ adaption of the *ašəm vohū* prayer has provided another important piece of evidence. It supports the view that the Avesta was recited in various provinces of Iran, and that dialectal features of that particular region could enter even the most holy passages. In this way Arachotic, Persian and, as it seems, also Parthian and Sogdian dialectal phonetic features found their way into the pronunciation of the sacred texts. It indicates furthermore that it was the spoken word which was handed down, and thus that the tradition was oral.

The time span covered by the Denkard account on the transmission of the Avesta may be divided into three sections: a period of origin, a middle one, and a final period or a „near-present“ one. As for the first section, the description of the origins of the Avestan texts is very detailed and refers to a written tradition initiated by Kavi Vištāspa, Zoroaster's patron. This period seems to be concluded by the invasion of the Greeks, who allegedly either destroyed or carried away the copies of the Avesta. The Denkard tells us very little about the second period, except for the reference to the efforts of Valāxš, the Arsacid king, to collect all the then surviving written and oral texts. The tale becomes more detailed again for the Sasanian era. Thus the Denkard legend exhibits a structure in which much is said about the period of origin and the recent past, but very little about the time in between. A similar pattern has been observed by Jan Vansina in oral traditions of origins and genesis, with particular reference to African societies: in oral societies historical memory focuses *both* on the immediate past *and* on the origin, whereas little information is handed down about the long middle period in between. The middle gap in such accounts, equivalent to our second period, was called by him „floating gap“, as in oral societies the gap in historical consciousness moves with the passage of generations<sup>67</sup>. Although, in contradistinction to the cultures examined by Vansina, script was extensively used in Sasanian Iran and before, the evidence indicates that the Zoroastrian religious tradition was prima-

63 Boyce/Grenet 1991, 16.

64 Henning 1942 [1944], 44; also Duchesne-Guillemin 1962a, 45 and Nyberg 1966, 419 (time of Šābuhr II.).

65 Hoffmann 1971, 66 (= 1975, 318).

66 de Blois 1990, 209–218.

67 Vansina 1985, 23f., 168f. (reference kindly provided by J. Wiesehöfer).

rily oral. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a structure characteristic of oral accounts in the Denkard story.

The first section of the Denkard account about the origins and early stages of the religion, according to which the Avesta was written down already under Vištāspa, is obviously legendary. However, the third part of the story, relating the tradition about the „near-present“ time, could preserve memories of historical events. For the linguistic evidence revealing traces of various Iranian dialects in the Avestan language agrees with what the Denkard reports about the efforts of various Iranian rulers. The latter, starting with one of the Arsacid kings called Valāxš, tried to bring together Avesta and Zand texts, then surviving in oral and written traditions in various provinces. Moreover, a renaissance of specifically Iranian culture in the late Arsacid period has also been observed in other areas of public life, such as numismatics<sup>68</sup>.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this: firstly, that the Avesta was widely spread all over Iran from the Achaemenid period onwards at the latest; and, secondly, that the Pahlavi reports about the collection of texts under various rulers of Iran have a historical kernel. The heterogeneous dialectal traces in the language of the Avesta indicate that there existed a number of local Avesta traditions in the various regions and provinces of Iran during the Achaemenid and Parthian periods and that there were regional variations in the pronunciation of the sacred texts<sup>69</sup>.

If the memories preserved in the Zoroastrian tradition are correct, the Sasanian rulers continued and completed the work begun by the Arsacids, and established, as it seems, a more uniform Zoroastrian state religion. The Avesta was canonized on the basis of the tradition of the Persis, and it is only this variant which has been preserved down to the present. Those of other regions may have continued to live on for some time, but did not survive the Islamic conquest and thus have been lost, probably forever.

#### Abbreviations

AchHist	Achaemenid History, Leiden
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CHI	The Cambridge History of Iran
IJJ	Indo-Iranian Journal
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.
RHR	Revue de l'Histoire des Religions
TPS	Transactions of the Philological Society
ZDMG	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft

68 See Wolski 1985–1988, 9; cf. also Nyberg 1938, 405, 408f.

69 The time when such dialectal elements crept into the sacred language of the Avesta may vary for the individual features. Some of the south-west Iranian traces, such as the syllabic pronunciation of post-consonantal *j* and *u*, probably date from Achaemenid times. The so-called Arachotic elements may be even older (see above n.48).



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